

Hitler, Adolf

{hit'-lur}

Adolf Hitler was the ruler of Germany from 1933 to 1945. Guided by concepts of elitism and racism, he established a brutal totalitarian regime under the ideological banner of National Socialism, or NAZISM. His drive for empire resulted in the devastation of World War II, culminating in Germany's defeat and the reordering of world power relationships.

#### Early Life

Hitler was born on Apr. 20, 1889, in the Austrian town of Braunau am Inn, the son of Alois, a customs official, and Klara Hitler. Alois, who was illegitimate, used his mother's name, Schicklgruber, until 1876, when he adopted the name Hitler. He was very stern with his son and abhorred Adolf's dreamy ways. His death, in 1903, came as a relief to Adolf. Adolf idealized his mother, however, whose death in 1907 had a traumatic effect on him.

Hitler failed as a student in the classical secondary schools, a situation that contributed to his desire to become an artist. He went to Vienna in 1907 but was unable to gain admission to the Academy of Fine Arts. He lived a shadowy, alienated existence in multiracial Vienna until 1913. His years there were characterized by melancholy, aimlessness, and racial hatred—in Vienna he developed his lifelong obsession with the "danger" that world Jewry posed to the "Aryan race."

In 1913, Hitler went to Munich, partly to evade conscription into the Austrian army. There, however, he answered the call to colors at the outbreak (August 1914) of World War I. Serving in the Bavarian Sixteenth Regiment on the western front, he distinguished himself for bravery and was awarded the Iron Cross, First Class. For the first time in his life Hitler had found a home; he glorified the raw majesty of life under fire, the beauty of comradeship, and the nobility of the warrior. His soldierly dreams of victory and fulfillment were shattered, however, by Germany's defeat. He became convinced that Germany had been "stabbed in the back" by Jews and Marxists.

#### Political Rise

Hitler's rise to power paralleled the unstable course of the Weimar Republic, which replaced the fallen Hohenzollern monarchy. The abortive Communist revolution in Germany and the dictated Peace of Versailles determined Hitler's decision to enter politics. In 1919 he joined a small political faction in Munich and within the next year formed the National Socialist German Workers' party (NSDAP). He directed the organization with an iron hand and used its meetings to deliver forceful rhetorical assaults on Germany's "enemies." In 1923 he led the party into the ill-fated MUNICH PUTSCH. This action resulted in his imprisonment.

While in prison at Landsberg, Hitler wrote MEIN KAMPF, which became the standard work of Nazi political philosophy. He defined the enemy as world Jewry, international communism, effete liberalism, and decadent capitalism. Hitler offered instead pure Aryan blood and the renewal of German nationalism under a fighting elite. Germany would once more become the leading power on the Continent and gain its living space (Lebensraum) in central Europe and Russia.

Released after serving 9 months of a 5-year sentence, Hitler reemerged as the NSDAP's leader in 1925. He moved swiftly to reshape the party and neutralize Gregor STRASSER, who had built a Nazi power base for himself in the industrial north. Hitler gathered around him a devoted cadre of lieutenants, including the air ace Hermann GOERING, the propagandist Joseph GOEBBELS, the police technician Heinrich HIMMLER, and the rabid anti-Semitic journalist Julius Streicher.

The Great Depression opened the way for Hitler's success. Mass unemployment, Communist insurgency, and an alliance between the Nazis and the industrialist Alfred Hugenberg's Nationalist party all contributed to the NSDAP's electoral breakthrough in September 1930. It increased its seats in the Reichstag from 12 to 107, becoming the second largest party. Hitler capitalized on the violent political climate by employing the SA (Sturmabteilung, or Brownshirts), the Nazi paramilitary arm, in the battle for the streets.

His strategy worked. In April 1932 he only narrowly lost the presidential election to the incumbent Paul von HINDENBURG, and elections in July made the Nazis the largest party in the Reichstag, with 37% of the vote. The party retained this position despite a decline in its vote in the November elections. Finally, Hindenburg, having failed to gain stability under the regimes of Heinrich BRUNING, Franz von PAPEN, and Kurt von SCHLEICHER,



named Hitler as chancellor on Jan. 30, 1933.

### Consolidation of Power

Hitler's consolidation of power was a gradual process that involved both the assumption of dictatorial authority and the elimination of opposition outside and within the Nazi party. The REICHSTAG fire of Feb. 27, 1933, provided a pretext for outlawing the Communist party and arresting its leaders. The real breakthrough, however, came with the Reichstag's passage of the Enabling Act on Mar. 23, 1933, giving Hitler 4 years of dictatorial powers.

Having won a commanding lead in the last free elections, held in March, Hitler proceeded to dismantle all parties except the NSDAP. All federal and state institutions and organizations were "coordinated," purged of Jewish influence, and brought under party control. On June 30, 1934, Hitler liquidated Ernst ROEHM, commander of the SA, along with hundreds of other Nazi radicals. With the death of Hindenburg in August 1934, Hitler also assumed the functions of the presidency. He adopted the title of Fuhrer, or supreme leader, of the THIRD REICH.

Institutional supremacy was reinforced by an elaborate terror apparatus, established by Reichsfuhrer Himmler, leader of the SS (Schutzstaffel, or Blackshirts), the paramilitary organization that supplanted the SA. The SS and GESTAPO instituted the notorious system of CONCENTRATION CAMPS. Although other groups and institutions suffered persecution by the Nazis because of their political unacceptability, the Jews were abused solely because of their racial identity. One decree after another eliminated them from their positions in the professions and bureaucracy. The Nuremberg Racial Laws of 1935 deprived them of their citizenship.

Propaganda went hand in hand with terror. Goebbels adroitly orchestrated themes that were synchronized with Hitler's successes in both domestic and foreign affairs. Germany's economic recovery reinforced the widespread support Hitler enjoyed throughout the Reich during in the 1930s.

### The Road to War

Hitler's economic policies were initially geared to recovery from the depression; thereafter, they were tied to his foreign-policy goals. By appointing Hjalmar SCHACHT, the architect of Germany's financial recovery in the 1920s, as his economics minister, Hitler reaffirmed his support of conservative economic policies. He undertook a vast program of public works, including construction of a network of superhighways (Autobahnen), which both returned the unemployed to work and primed the economy. By naming Goering director of the Four Year Plan in 1936, however, Hitler focused the entire economy on preparations for war.

Hitler's foreign-policy goals were spelled out in Mein Kampf: to overturn the Versailles settlement and unite all Germans in a single Greater Germany, to destroy Bolshevism, and to conquer and colonize eastern Europe. At first he proceeded cautiously. He withdrew Germany from the League of Nations as early as October 1933, but he offset criticism by repeated declarations of his peaceful intentions and by concluding a series of bilateral agreements, including a nonaggression pact with Poland (1934). As the indecisiveness of his opponents became clear, Hitler acted more forcefully. In March 1935 he announced the rearmament of Germany in open violation of the Treaty of Versailles. He was rewarded by Britain's concurrence in the form of an Anglo-German Naval Pact (June 1935). The following year, without warning, he remilitarized the Rhineland, and France remained immobile. The two major European democracies, fearful of war, seemed set on the course of appeasement.

Bolstered by the formation (1936) of the Rome-Berlin AXIS and the Anti-Comintern Pact with Japan, Hitler outlined his war plans to the German military leaders in a secret meeting in November 1937. Several of them objected and were promptly dismissed. In March 1938 he annexed Austria (the Anschluss). Later that year, after an international crisis over alleged abuses to ethnic Germans in the Sudeten area of western Czechoslovakia, Britain and France joined Italy in signing the Sudetenland over to Germany at the MUNICH CONFERENCE. In March 1939, German troops completed the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia. Belatedly, Britain and France moved to guarantee Poland's integrity. Hitler, undeterred, concluded (August 1939) the NAZI-SOVIET PACT, which cleared the way for his attack on Poland on September 1. He was surprised but prepared when France and Britain declared war on September 3. The pact with the USSR provided him the opportunity to crush his enemies in the west piecemeal.

### World War II

Hitler became overconfident during the BLITZKRIEG campaigns of 1939-40, when he was lionized as the "greatest military commander of all times." With victories in Poland (1939) and France (1940) he avenged the alleged injustices of Versailles. By June 1940, Axis control stretched from the Arctic to North Africa, from France to central

Europe. Hitler received his first reversal in the BATTLE OF BRITAIN (fall 1940), forcing him to abandon his plan to invade Britain.

The Fuhrer lost no time in establishing the "New Order" in occupied Europe, a system based on terror, forced labor, and concentration camps. Under the cover of war, he began the "Final Solution of the Jewish Question," which involved the liquidation of European Jewry (see HOLOCAUST).

In June 1941, Hitler cast aside the Nazi-Soviet Pact and invaded the USSR, as he had always planned. He was rewarded with several major victories in classic battles of encirclement. The Soviets, however, turned the tide—first at Moscow (December 1941) and later at Stalingrad (winter 1942-43). Moreover, in December 1941, the United States—a factor that Hitler had barely considered—entered the war.

By mid-1943, Hitler's time of trial had begun. The bloody retreat from Russia had commenced, North Africa was lost, his Italian ally Benito MUSSOLINI had fallen, and German cities were being demolished by Allied bombing. In June 1944 the Allies landed on the coast of France, opening the long-awaited second front. Hitler was the victim of an assassination attempt by a group of his own officers on July 20, 1944, but he miraculously survived. A physical wreck, he became increasingly bitter and isolated.

With German defenses crumbling in the east and west, Hitler finally realized that his fate was sealed. Having appointed Adm. Karl DOENITZ as his successor and married his long-time companion Eva BRAUN, he committed suicide in Berlin on Apr. 30, 1945. This signaled the disintegration of the Third Reich and the end of the Fascist era.

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See also: GERMANY, HISTORY OF; TOTALITARIANISM; WORLD WAR II.